



# SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY HEALTH AGENCY

## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

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**Jeff Hamm**  
*Health Agency Director*

**Anne Robin**  
*Behavioral Health Administrator*

Supervisor Bruce Gibson, Chairman  
San Luis Obispo County Board Of Supervisors

Dear Mr. Gibson:

The County Behavioral Health Advisory Board writes to encourage and recommend the support of the Board of Supervisors for the Behavioral Health Department's plans to recruit and hire psychiatrists. The Department has for many years experienced considerable difficulty in filling vacant psychiatry positions. The county has not been able to offer salaries competitive with those paid by the State at the Men's Colony and the Atascadero State Hospital. Newly licensed psychiatrists, burdened with student loans, have been deterred by the high cost of local housing.

To be specific, we support department plans to:

- Increase the salary scale for psychiatrists—We recognize that the county cannot and should not offer salaries at the same level as the prison and the state hospital, required to pay top dollar due to the scrutiny of the federal courts. We do, however, provide a far more attractive and rewarding work environment, which will be enhanced by nudging our salary scale upward.
- Use telepsychiatry—This is common practice for California counties. Using telepsychiatry services such as those available from UC Irvine, Kingsview Corporation, and Loma Linda University Medical center assure that mental health clients are seen timely and served in their preferred language. Using telepsychiatry services is the single most important thing this county can do to assure service stability.
- Increase the fee level paid to locum tenens agencies—We regret that this county has been reliant on these agencies as the health, competence and fitness of the physician pool has been highly variable over the years. That said, we appreciate the need by every county to use locum tenens due staff vacancies and leaves of absence due to illness. The county, in tight fiscal times, has relied on second tier agencies and paid the price that comes with second tier professionals. The Department plans to contract, at a higher price, with those agencies with the strongest reputation for quality care

The above measures will resolve issues of long wait times and staffing instability. For the long term, the Department plans to expand the use of psychiatric nurse practitioners and engage in targeted recruitment from Fresno State University's nurse practitioner program. The Department also plans to explore the feasibility of serving as a residency site for new psychiatrists and achieving student loan forgiveness status as a community with an acute shortage in psychiatrists.

We applaud the efforts of Jeff Hamm and Anne Robin to tackle this difficult problem and urge that you approve their plans.

David Riester, Chairperson  
San Luis Obispo County  
Behavioral Health Advisory Board